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ABSTRACT

The language journal can be an effective aid for teaching students to be aware of and sensitive to language. Students write down any observations that interest them about the language they hear or read in everyday life, together with their speculations on the causes of such language. The journal is devoted specifically to language because an effective writer must be sensitive to language. It also does not encourage skills in purely narrative and descriptive writing at the cost of expository and argumentative writing. The content of the language journal offers a bridge or transition between a student's daily life and academic life. Entries range from fundamental observations to sophisticated speculation, and topics range from the language of family, friends, teachers, and street talk to expressions in song lyrics, on public transportation, of politicians, of advertisements, and in body language. As students grow sensitive to and critical of how others express themselves, they grow sensitive to and critical of how they express themselves. The journal encourages students to teach themselves about both speaking and writing without an inner "resistance" to language learning. (Several student journal entries are included.) (HTH)

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THE LANGUAGE JOURNAL:

BRIDGE TO EXPOSITORY AND ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

Sabina Thorne Johnson

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THE LANGUAGE JOURNAL:
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As a teacher of Composition, I sometimes wish that the situation I face were like that in some sort of primitive epic, or a Hoppalong Cassidy Western, or even a Saturday morning cartoon. I would like, on the one hand, to have a specific villain to pursue, say, television, whose ubiquitous and pervasive verbal smog seems as damaging to our students' linguistic sensibilities as is high decibel noise to one's capacity to hear anything at all. And I would like, on the other, to have specific hero, a cureall for the many weaknesses our students have as writers, who would sweep down and save the day. But, alas, neither is ever to be.

And so I seek, now and again, methods or practices, preferably ones that are time or energy saving, that will simplify my task - which means to me ones that will encourage students to teach themselves matters about language that otherwise I must teach them, often without their being aware that that is what they are doing. For example, what effective speech or writing is. What kind of either is appropriate to a given situation. What points, in speaking or writing, one must consider or ignore at one's cost. What the role of language is or can be in the various situations that life offers us. The methods or practices I use to to help students teach themselves is determined by who, any

particular semester, is sitting in my classroom.

Teaching language awareness seems to me to have complicated itself in the last few years, since my classes, for various historical and political reasons, have become increasingly heterogeneous. For many of you, this may be true also. How, today, do we teach anything about language to classes filled with students of extremely diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds? How do we help them teach themselves about language? The exercise that I have hit upon is the Language Journal, not a cureall, but an aid. And, since the theme of this conference is "Celebrating Language," I thought I might share it with you.

I am aware, since my work has been with Freshmen at UC Berkeley, that what I have to say and what the students themselves say in their journal entries may seem irrelevant to the needs of students at the primary and secondary levels. However, I believe that the journal as an exercise can be adapted and that its use at lower levels can hasten writing skills and take some burden off those who teach them.

What is the Language Journal?

The Language Journal is a journal, kept in a special notebook, in which the student jots down any observations that interest her about the language she hears or reads in her everyday life, together with her speculations on why her recorded phenomena occur, whether she thinks the cause to be the personality or purpose of the speakers or the nature of language itself or whatever. The topics may be tied to whatever aspect of language one may be teaching, if one is teaching a language-oriented

course; they may be tied to a list of concerns provided by the teacher, such as slang, dialect, peer language, television ad language, or the language of politicians; or they may be absolutely free, chosen by the student solely on the basis of her interest in them. Two suggestions: 1) that the teacher does not assign grades or correct the entries in any way, though she may show her interest by writing language comments of her own in their margins, and 2) that the teacher assign neither a maximum number of entries per week or a maximum length for them.
(Advisable is a minimum of one or two entries weekly of whatever length the student finds comfortable, also that the journal be turned in weekly.)

Why a journal devoted specifically to language?

First to put it simply, find me an effective writer who is not sensitive to language. Consciously or otherwise, all such writers are careful observers of language, both spoken and written. They distinguish levels, styles, patterns, efficiencies and luxuries, overt and covert means of expression, in short, both the striking and subtle ways in which people express themselves. They also, as we all know, were probably early and prolific readers, treasuring up the rich possibilities of language well before they were aware that they were doing so. The journal, by encouraging perpetual observation of language (if only because the student learns to be on constant lookout for promising topics), offers a means to develop or accelerate such sensitivity to language in those who lack it, whatever their socio-economical or linguistic or cultural background. It demands equal effort by all.

Second, the language journal does not have the pitfalls of the so-called personal journal that became popular in the sixties and remains today as the chief means by which we free both the student and ourselves of the constraints of purely classroom prose and encourage a free flowing, lively, spontaneous style of writing. Namely, it does not encourage skills in purely narrative and descriptive writing at the cost of skills in expository and argumentative writing, and therefore, it does not overlook the traumatic gap between expressive writing and the more formal, impersonal, analytical writing expected of older students, the gap they must cross over sooner or later. The nature of the content in the language journal, by which I mean both the data recorded and the student's speculation on it, offers a bridge, or a transition, if you will, between the student's daily life and his academic one.

What is the range of thinking and of topics in the language journal?

To give some idea of how students at very different levels of sophistication and with very different kinds of minds can use the journal to work out their thoughts about language, let me quote two students, who, as far as I am concerned, represent the extremes within my classes.

The first is an eighteen year old girl, Philippine-born, of a low income family, whose interest in intellectual pursuits was rather minimal:

> This morning, my little sister, who is only three, came to me and said, "Sis, where is my scarfa?" At that moment I really didn't know what she meant by "scarfa," but as I studied her words, I

realized that she meant only "scarf." I told her the correct word, but she said, "Well, Mommy and Daddy say it like that."

So during dinner that day, I decided to concentrate on the language my family used. As expected, it was a combination of three languages. They were even coming out with some words that couldn't be in any dictionary because they were made up. After half an hour of this observation, I was laughing so hard that my family got curious.

When I explained to them what was so funny, they looked at me like, "Are you feeling all right?" Yes, I was, but their confusion was that we have become so used to our language that we see nothing wrong with it. But when someone else from a different house sometimes hesitates when we are talking to them - it's funny to realize after all these years why that is!

"Realize" is a frequent work in student language journals, indicating that they are undergoing a process of awareness and discovery.

The second entry is from a fifteen year old boy, white, middle-class, whose interest in abstract thinking was unusual for the Freshmen that I encounter. The entry is longer; however, I will read it entire:

Today I was sitting and thinking. Looking at things a bit. I thought about doing some writing. Not a bad idea. But then I thought about doing some other things: watching TV or sleeping.

I then figured that I ought to write. It was more constructive. But what in actuality is writing? The process is actually very remarkable; it is one of the most interesting processes that a human can do. It is comparable to the process in physics where at the speed of light energy is transformed into material or the reverse. In writing, mental thoughts (energy) are expressed (transformed) into words on paper (material). Obviously, there are differences. Our thoughts do not exactly transform directly onto paper. Yet the similarity is much more important that the differences. Mental thoughts that are energy are temporary. They are not a solid form. But when we express them on paper they become solid.

The process is reversed when one reads.

> One takes solid information that is written down and transforms it into the mental energy of thoughts.
>
> After making all those startling conclusions, I decided that I would watch TV.

Here again one sees the process of awareness and discovery at work. (I am aware that this entry is atypical; I use it only to show the full range of entries possible at the college Freshman level.)

Once a student turns his ear, and eye, to language, the topics on which he finds something of interest to say are many. Glancing through a single set of journals, I found all the following topics: the language of family, friends, teachers, street talk, Valley girl talk, jokes, questions, textbooks, movies, politicans, advertisers, billboards, sports, song lyrics, BART and Muni passengers, and body language.

I would like to read you selections from entries on some of these topics:

On family:

> My grandmother, who is 78, is growing increasingly senile. She always asks questions, usually the same ones each time I see her, and it exhausts me to talk to her. I realize now that I get so tired because I have to bring my vocabulary down to a very basic level. It's almost baby talk, but that's the only way she can understand me. It really wears me out.

On a teacher:

> My Chemistry professor doesn't communicate too well, at least to me. He constantly speaks in the passive voice, which makes it difficult for me to follow during lecture. He also says, "if one plots..." or "if one held the magnetic, by which is known..." He could, instead, say, "the magnetic is called..." Now I understand why teachers hate to read papers in the passive voice. It's confusing.

On casual conversation:

I read the essay on generalizations by Hayakawa and, like so many other things, once I understood the idea, I noticed it right away. At a party, within an hour, I talked to two people. One spoke in such general terms that I walked away without an idea of what the person was talking about. The other talked about a movie and didn't leave out a detail. I can't decide which one I disliked more.

On TV:

I am presently watching a TV show, and it occurs to me that the dialogue is totally unnatural. The characters are speaking in long phrases, using intellectual expressions. It contradicts real life conversations among teenagers, which use short phrases and plenty of slang. The level of conversation also presents a sharp contrast to reality. The characters are trying to analyze the concepts of life and the world. In a real conversation, teenagers rarely talk above the level of checking out the opposite sex, video games, music, dating, or how did you do on the test. The writer should spend a week in a high school to see how real teenagers talk before ever writing another line.

On pets:

[Or] when people talk to puppies, they talk in a high pitched voice with few syllable words. Why? Dogs don't know what you're saying to them...They perceive what you're saying by your tone. You can say, "I love you" in an angry tone, and the dog will assume that you're angry because he did something bad.

On saying "I know":

Another phrase that clamors in my ears is, "I know." I say, "The movie was good." The response is "I know." "My parents are mad at me." "I know." "Your dress is very pretty." "I know."

Saying "I know" is a habit. Habits are meant to be broken, at least in this case. Instead of responding to a good movie with "I know," "I agree," sounds much better. There are other ways of recognizing a person's statement than "I know," especially when the person saying "I know" doesn't really know at all. And, if you do know, it would not be so bad to appear humble from time to time.

"I know" has the power to stop a discussion. It's as if a huge period was placed on a sentence. Using the example of "The movie was good." - "I know," I can illustrate my point. If "I know" was replaced with "I agree,' the next logical step would be to say "because...I liked it best when..." etc. "I know"

can virtually stop any conversation.

People should think more about what words they use. Even if you want a powerful word, the words "I'm sorry," "I know" and various obscenities would have more effect if used infrequently and literally.

The first thing you may have noticed about these journal entries is that they don't sound like the writing of so-called remedial students, even at UC Berkeley. That's true; they don't. However, I would like to delay discussing the matter until after I move on to another noticeable characteristic that all these entries share: their stance is critical. Is this bad? I don't think so. The general pattern of these entries is observation, reflection, sometimes understanding, and, finally, evaluation. Now, my sense is that these students are sensitizing themselves to how others use language, deciding what they like and don't like in the process; and my experience has shown me that, as they grow sensitive to and critical of how others express themselves, they grow sensitive to and critical of how they express themselves. And, because I believe that you value anything you teach yourself more than anything you receive, often on faith, from someone else, this critical stance pleases me.

Of course, not all entries are merely critical. Some hit upon certain principles of language. I would like to read you four of these. The first shows a concern with rhetorical strategy:

> The way something is said is almost as important as what is said. I am finding questions, rather than statements, are the most effective tool in a conversation. A question conveys to the listener that one has a sincere interest in him. A question gives the listener choices and makes him more actively involved in a conversation. People like to feel that their opinion matters, and a question does that. People do not like to be told what to do. When an order is put in a question form, the

listener does not feel force. When trying to lead a discussion, open-ended questions work well. Some people will try to escape with a "yes" or "no." But if a question is carefully worded, it can draw shy people out.

And here is one about the relationship between one's life and one's language:

> In the U.S.A., most Americans speak English, but all Americans do not have the same vocabulary. Builders have a different vocabulary from doctors and doctors from business men. All types of builders have basically the same vocabulary, but in some trades, where certain builders get no exposure to a tool or use a special technique that most of the other types of builders don't use, their vocabulary might be a little different. For instance, any carpenter knows what a "plumb bob" is, but a plumber may not. So, if a carpenter asks a plumber for a plumb bob, he may not get it because the plumber has never seen one, because the plumber never uses one. Different vocabularies are not just job-oriented; they happen everywhere (Catholics knowing church terms, but an atheist not).
>
> And it's all due to whether or not you see or hear about something in every day situations. Daily exposure is the key to a person's vocabulary.

Some students speculate on the differences between spoken and written language. Here is a general entry on this matter:

> Perhaps one of the causes for the difference between spoken and written language is that written language is too complex to be spoken. If we spoke as we wrote, many of our listeners wouldn't understand what we said. Thoughts are a lot easier to understand if they are simplified as much as possible.

And here is a very specific and, I think, rather subtle one on a topic I could not have imagined any student would choose to write on:

> Today I noticed the way people paused when they talked. In writing, pauses are caused by punctuation, of course, and the pause is always for the same amount of time. Also the reader has control over the pauses in what he is reading. In speech, however, the listener has no control over the pauses that the speaker makes.
>
> At the dinner table this evening, I was talking to a girl across from me. When she talked, she made quite a few long pauses, either because she was trying to think of something else to say or trying to add something to what she was already saying or perhaps just watching my

> facial expression. In any case, her pauses were prominent, and I had a hard time preventing my thoughts from drifting away from our conversation.
>
> A conversation can be effective, but if the pauses aren't suitable to the listener, it can become tedious. Yet in writing, if the subject is interesting, the reader is going to pause when he feels like it and when it is comfortable to him.

And, finally, some students, far more than the entries I have selected indicate, like simply to wonder. For example:

> Helen Keller, now she is a person to admire, not just her but all the blind and deaf people. How do you describe colors, the sun, the moon, and so on, to a deaf person? If a person has never heard a word, how can he know what it is and what to associate it with? I just can't comprehend what life would be like without the sound of language. How would a person describe language to a deaf person? It isn't an object you can point to. Life is difficult enough when everything is in place, but what is it like when you can't hear or see?

Now, to pick up the quality of these students' writing. All the excerpts I have read come from Subject A (so-called remedial level) students. Some were written at the beginning of the course before we had ever discussed matters of grammar, usage and style. Some were written by students whose formal writing was only barely substandard; others were written by students with severe problems, including one student who was so beset by dyslexia and a writing block that he failed to pass the course. Yet none of the excerpts reveals the plight of these students as formal essayists. The occasional redundancy or approximating phrase or overly loose construction is hardly a problem needing "remediation"; neither is the lack of stylistic elegance. Far more striking in all the entries is that the diction is apt and the sentences both clear and varied, exhibiting every kind of modification and subordination.

You might ask whether, in order to present them to you, I cleaned them up. The answer is, beyond spelling, punctuation, minor matters of usage, such as "like" for "as," and an occasional faulty tense, that I did not have to. There is, was, simply nothing wrong with this writing. Yet these same students, when asked to write a formal essay, whether in class or at home, write simple, declarative sentences, filled with expletive and passive constructions, weak or pallid verbs, and vague, often empty assertions - I pass over their wretched and often labyrinthine attempts to qualify an assertion. Furthermore, in the above entries, the students present an abundance of evidence to support whatever point concerns them, and they seem quite naturally to analyze it and to consider the causes for or effects of its presence.

How can students who normally write rather poorly write so acceptably? What does it mean?

One may offer a number of answers, of course. The pervasiveness of language and, therefore, the abundance of language material that a student can draw on comes to mind immediately. But I would suggest that the main answer is something we often hear, namely, that students, like the rest of us, write most effectively when they know what they are writing about. This statement, I would note, means more than having learned a particular body of material; it means being truly centered in the familiarity of one's mind. That, I would suggest is what writing a language journal encourages. Students, like everyone else, have language. The landscape is familiar, and they are familiar with themselves in it. All they must do is observe

some of its details and speculate on them in accordance with their mind set.

The consequence, in many entries, is an "I know," or an "I realize," or an "I understand," an acting out of that process of awareness and discovery that occurs all the time in daily life and that we all wished occurred with greater frequency in the classroom.

And what do they learn? Why they seem linguistically eccentric to native speakers; why the act of writing bears a correlation to the transformation of energy in physics; why it is so hard to talk or listen to oversimplified language; why the passive voice confuses and wearies a listener; why talking too generally or too specifically has an adverse effect on a listener; why TV script writing is sometimes phoney; why filler phrases obstruct, instead of encourage, the flow of conversation; why, as Wittgenstein said, "the limits on one's language are the limits of one's world"; why style is almost as important as substance; why speech is simpler in structure than writing; why punctuation can help or hinder an audience. All these observations are or lead to very large questions about language, and, from the immediately practical point of view, lead to an understanding of what sorts of language are effective in different situations and what sorts are not.

What I am suggesting, then, is that the simple act of keeping a language journal makes the student alert to the possibilities of language, fosters in him the ability to analyze, to speculate, to ponder on the principles that arise naturally in the course of his writing. In short, the journal encourages students to teach

themselves about both speaking and writing without their being aware of it. So natural a learning process meets with no inner resistance.

Are there other benefits to language journals?

Yes. First, as I have suggested, the same skills that the students draw on naturally for their journals spill over to their academic or formal writing, which means that they no longer have to pretend to know what written discussion is and try, as Lanham says, to "imitate their elders," since they been discussing their ideas in writing with no instruction at all.

Other instructors in Subject A who have used the language journal have found other advantages. To begin with, for many students, this is the first time they have ever written seriously to themselves and for themselves. And, since they are mostly comfortable and even friendly with themselves, they are writing for an unthreatening reader. This rapport and ease, like their more sophisticated sentence structures, soon begins to color their writing for a teacher. And because they are thinking freshly as they write, their formal writing begins to develop the texture of a reflecting mind and to convey that to their reader. Next, the journal allows the student's voice to come through naturally (a matter not easy to teach), and, furthermore, because it reveals to the teacher the kinds of things a particular student wonders about and pays attention to, it give the teacher clear pointers on how to guide and interest the student. Again, the journal raises topics that promise good in-class discussion or that may well serve as the basis for future formal essays. Above all, the journal gives the student a kind of self-confidence about her

ability to observe, reflect and analyze that a teacheer cannot give her directly in a short period of time.

But this is me speaking, expressing my opinions and those of other Subject A instructors. Let me close with the advantages that one of my students saw in this kind of writing:

> Since this is the final entry in my Subject A journal I want to talk about the things that I wrote, why I wrote them, and what writing them did for me.
>
> I picked the topics in language that we discussed in class most often because the observations stuck in my mind. After reading and talking about euphemism, abstraction, stereotyping, writing about them comes naturally. I learned a few things from the pattern. The first is that communicating with others about ideas <u>really</u> does aid in writing about them. If the ideas can find the words verbally, then they can be written. (Maybe this follows the comment you [S.T.J.] made that "you cannot write more brilliantly than you can think - ever.") The second thing I learned was that, given time, input and the chance to recount things, my opinions formed and I became able to relate them to other parts of my life (school is the most obvious because it is my life now).
>
> Writing in this notebook has not been a hassle, but a release and an exploration, if not a revelation. I complained about people's manner of talking and even TV. I explored my own writing and English background, which has prompted me to plan much reading and time in the public library over Christmas vacation. The revelation appears in the form of language having more influence over me than I would ever have guessed. Honestly, before I entered this class, I must have spent a total of five minutes pondering language - what a foolish negligence. I have to thank this book for the opportunity to learn these things.

If language is what all of us who teach Composition at any and every level are basically teaching, then perhaps the language journal offers us a way to accelerate both our task and that of our students.

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